

VELVET

UNFORGETTABLE



From a pre-partition Bangladeshi refugee to an unchallenged icon of Indian cinema... Bimal Roy has left behind a heritage of moving shadows that continues to tower over the Indian film bastion.

Rinki Bhattacharya, Bimal Roy's daughter, attempts to capture the enigma that was her father, in a tete-a-tete with CINÉ BLITZ.

There are no huge blow-ups of the man who gave the Indian film industry some of its most beautiful films. Perhaps because Rinki Bhattacharya believes in keeping her father alive in her heart and through little touches, like his favourite bowls of fragrant flowers which enliven her beautiful Carter Road abode.

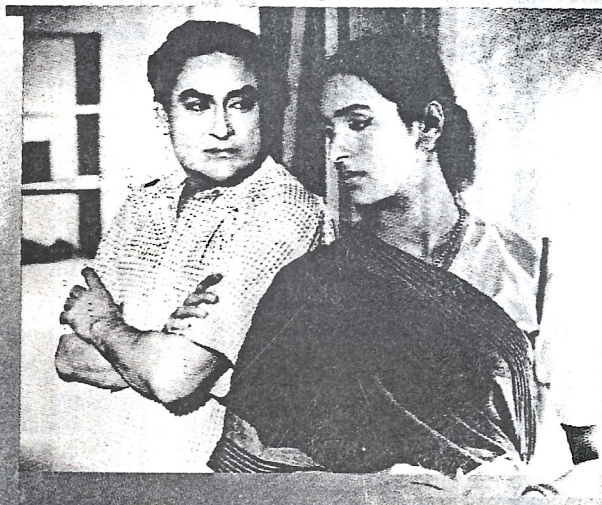
"Father was a great admirer of beauty," recalls Rinki, "That's also why he married my mother, a renowned beauty of her times. His room would always be filled with flowers. Flowers are one thing I always associate with my father because he always liked to be surrounded by them."

As a father, Rinki describes Bimal Roy as being extremely reserved and private. "The reason I named my book, *A Man of Silences* is because he spoke so little! Even if he was at home, we wouldn't know of his presence. He would quietly return from work and the first thing he would do, was place his glasses, his pack of cigarettes and his purse on the table that he would sit at. It was his routine. He was a very meticulous person."

A faraway look in her eyes, Rinki talks about the days when her father had escaped on a boat, along with his mother, to Calcutta. In the 1930s India was burning and communal tension was already at its peak. Bimal Roy, then a young boy, lost his father, was cheated of his huge family estates and had to set out to an unknown destination to eke out a living. Rinki talks proudly of the adventurous members of her father's family... of the brother who ran away to England as a stowaway aboard a ship, with big dreams and no money in his pockets and came back one day with a fortune! "There were enough signs of distress in our house. Father was working for Sir B.M. Sarcar, one of the leading film producers of that time. My uncle tells me that Baba's salary was Rs. 400; a king's ransom in those days. Monetarily however, we were severely limited because we lived in a joint family. I am always reminded of that last shot in father's film, *Do Bigha Zameen*, whenever I hear about my grandmother's and Baba's journey to Calcutta in a boat."

Remembering

IMAGES



Ashok Kumar was responsible for robbing Bengal and Bengalis of Bimal Roy!

Bimal Roy's *Udayar Pathey*, according to Rinki created a furore in Bengal. It became a cult film for young intellectuals. "I have not known any Bengali of that time who didn't watch the film at least five times! Satyajit babu (Satyajit Ray), who was a contemporary of my father, even wrote in an article that he was greatly influenced by the film. When my father's second film *Fossil* was announced, the first thing Satyajit babu did was to go and buy the story, write its script, and take it to my father. This was the kind of impact Baba had on people. Later, *Udayar Pathey* was made in Hindi and was called *Humrahi*. People say that it is perhaps one of the finest films ever produced by the Indian film industry."

— he financial decline of studios in Bengal forced Bimal Roy to migrate to Bombay in the fifties. Recalling that period Rinki says, "It was a tough time for all of us. We had grown up in Bengal and it was very difficult to let go of our roots. Bengalis, being an emotional race, felt extremely betrayed when Baba left Calcutta... In fact, after he left for Bombay, a whole lot of other people also started migrating to the city. Salil Chowdhury was one of them."

"It was Ashok Kumar who had called father to work for Bombay Talkies which was owned by Devika Rani. When we came to Bombay, we were asked to put up at Devika Rani's bungalow. By then, I had grown up enough to realise that Baba was different from other fathers. That his work was far more exciting than other men's... Bombay Talkies, which was walking distance from the house, now became our playground. 'Start sound', 'camera', 'action', now became familiar words. I probably formed a closer bond with films because of all the time I spent playing in the studio and its editing room! I also became a particular favourite with my father's colleagues."

It was now that Rinki began to realise that her father was spinning dreams for millions. "I was a young girl and I didn't think movies were a big deal. Baba however was becoming a bigger name everyday. Now I would see a Dilip Kumar coming over... a Raaj Kumar... Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Salil Chowdhury became well known faces in our house. One thing however was very clear: These personalities didn't drop in to socialise with my father. They came to discuss work. In any case, everyone knew that Baba was just not the kind to attend cocktail parties and entertain. This was part of showbiz but my father was neither a drinker nor too much of a social person and so he kept away from it all."

The Roy household has been described by many as being a typical middle class Bengali one. Rinki agrees with this. "There was Rabindra sangeet, Bengali food and lots of books... we were reared on all this. Till the very end, Baba retained his middle class Bengali roots. He never changed. Work was his passion and often as a little girl I would see him working late into the night, on some script or the other. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night and peep from my room, see the reassuring glow of Baba's cigarette and go back to sleep peacefully."

In 1953 Bimal Roy launched his own production house, Bimal Roy Productions with *Do Bigha Zameen*. The film took critics and the audience by storm. It introduced Indian cinema to Europe, winning awards at Karlovy Vary and Venice. Remembering the release of *Do Bigha Zameen*, Rinki says, "All I can remember of the premiere was the bright lights, the women in diamonds and gajras and the men looking dapper in suits. These are the images imprinted in my mind. I also remember practically the entire industry being there to watch the Bimal Roy film. Ameen Sayani was even carrying the report live on Ceylon Radio. Sunil Dutt, then known as Balraj, was working for Ceylon Radio and interviewing all the stars, including Nargisji. It was a matter of great pride that *Do Bigha*

Bimal Roy with Sir B.M. Sarcar. The director was paid a king's ransom by Sarcar – Rs 400 every



Bimal Roy

Zameen was the first Hindi film to be shown at Metro cinema. Earlier, due to racial bias only English movies were allowed to be screened there."

Bimal Roy's subsequent films took him closer and closer to being a legend in his lifetime. Whether it was the classic *Parineeta*, the thoughtful *Devdas*, the lyrical *Sujata*, the heart rending *Bandini*, or the visually stunning *Madhumati*, each film was eagerly awaited. "A Bimal Roy release was a big event in the industry," agrees Rinki. "People awaited the films of Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan and my father. Baba's films have not become dated because he crafted them in a totally naturalistic manner. If you watch Guru Dutt's films you'll notice that the acting is very stylised. Satyajit Ray has himself said that my father broke the mould of Parsi theatre kind of acting and brought realism into his films."

"My father was a man who believed in detailing. Recently Nirupa Roy, who had acted in *Do Bigha Zameen*, told me that he had insisted that all the female artistes cut their nails and wear only old clothes for the film. He specially went to Chor Bazaar and picked up old clothes for the entire cast because he believed in authenticity. It was amazing, the kind of respect he commanded! No artiste would dare make my father wait. On the sets, every artiste was in position and ready to give their shot, and only then would my father be called!"

Rinki speaks about sensing the sanctity of her father's work, whenever she entered his sets. "My father didn't encourage superficial or supercilious behaviour. He never allowed anyone to get too close to him. You would never see my father sitting and chatting with anyone. Nobody dared to gossip in his presence. People were always cautious and well behaved around him. When you walked on to his sets, you felt as if you were in the presence of something sacred."

If there is one thing the industry still talks about, it's Bimal Roy's velvety images. "As a director, he was completely in command of everything," says Rinki. "I have seen him fussing endlessly with the lights, because he wanted the positions just so. He was an extremely sensitive technician and he would take special care of that aspect of filmmaking. In fact, there would be bets laid everyday amongst my father's assistants! I would hear them talk to each other, saying, 'Today we've placed the lights just the way Bimalda likes it; today he won't change the positions of the lights'. Invariably, my father would come and change everything! His heroines would say that no one could make them look the way my father did."



Nutan was a great favourite with Bimal Roy and some of her strongest performances were for films directed by him. *Sujata* and *Bandini* were just such a couple of them.

Bimal Roy's *Devdas*, has been an inspiration to entire generations of directors. Currently Sanjay Leela Bhansali spends all his time watching Bimal Roy's version of *Devdas*.



What does she remember of the making of legendary films like *Sujata*, *Devdas*, *Madhumati*... "We were never glamour struck by Baba's profession. Films were no big deal for us. We saw these films through a child's eyes. There was a tremendous amount of pride, of course. I was a good audience. I would cry when the scene moved me, laugh when it was funny... But yes, there was an extra edge to seeing Baba's films. I would wait for the credits to roll just so I could clap for my father when his name appeared finally! It was a moment of great pride."

"*Sujata* remains one of my favourite films. It never fails to move people to tears no matter what their age, even today. Recently I was in Italy for a festival along with *Sujata*, and I was sitting outside the screening theatre, chatting with Shabana Azmi. At the end of the film, people streamed out, holding handkerchiefs to their tear-filled eyes. That's the kind of film my father had made... *Sujata* goes beyond the subject of caste. It's a film about relationships, about deep emotional bonds and I guess it appeals to emotions universally. It had strong performances, beautiful camera work and stunning visuals...it won the silver medal for the best film on untouchability."

The sun, a huge tangerine ball is sinking into the sea and the cold cups of tea tell us that more than an hour has passed learning more about Bimal Roy. As we reluctantly take leave of his beautiful daughter, she remorsefully tells us, "I wish someone would undertake a serious criticism and analysis of my father's work. His films have been neglected. At one point, every heroine wanted to work with him. When he launched the film *Biraj Bahu*, Madhubala, who was dying to work with him, called up his best friend and told him to recommend her name to my father. But my father's friend told her that he couldn't do that because she was too glamorous for the role! Waheeda Rehman also was a great admirer of my father and had always wanted to work with him. Smriti Sandhya, my father's filmography re-written with songs from his films, is in my father's honour. It's a voyage into the magical, mystical era of Indian film music. We pay homage to the old masters, Madan Mohan, Roshan, Salil Chowdhury, S. D. Burman, Hemant Kumar...even stars like Waheeda Rehman, Suraiya, Nutan, Meena Kumari. I needed to do something for Baba and this was the way I could do it."

Yes, a man like Bimal Roy, a filmmaker who brought about the advent of the Golden Age of Hindi cinema, definitely needs to be kept alive in public memory.